



A Parent's Guide to "Mitzvah Projects"

BJE Impact: The Center for Jewish Service Learning seeks to inspire Jewish youth to "Learn. Act. Reflect. IMPACT." Our goal is for youth to engage in meaningful service opportunities that combine hands-on action, Jewish learning, and identity building, and we support and facilitate this through a variety of ways, including guiding parents and B'nai Mitzvah students through the process of engaging in meaningful Mitzvah Projects.

What is a Mitzvah Project?

Many synagogues are including "Mitzvah Projects" as part of the B'nai Mitzvah process. It is a social action or community service project for the B'nai Mitzvah student to put their Jewish values and identity into practice. Becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah symbolizes becoming an adult within the Jewish community, and taking on responsibilities to that community. A Mitzvah Project is a way for B'nai Mitzvah students to express a unique way that they are actively helping to improve their community.

Why a Guide for Parents?

We believe that a Mitzvah Project is most meaningful when it is personally relevant to your child, and that you are the best guide for them in this process. We want to give you a framework and questions to help you guide your child through a meaningful experience.

In this guide, you will find a suggested framework of steps for your child and questions that you can ask along the way. We hope that this will help you and your child engage in a meaningful experience as you work together on the Mitzvah Project!



For the Bar/Bat Mitzvah Child—Suggested Steps for Your Mitzvah Project:

1. *Find your inspiration:*

- a. What do you want to base your project around? Use one or more of the following to help you find an inspiration point to spark your Mitzvah Project:
 - i. A particular Jewish value or idea: speak with your rabbi/educator about your Bar/Bat Mitzvah Torah portion—is there a value at the heart of that portion that speaks to you? Or, another value that is important to you? When you become Bar/Bat Mitzvah, you become an adult in the eyes of the Jewish community, with the responsibility of contributing to making your community better. What are the values that are important to you that you want to act on within your community?
 - ii. A cause or issue: is there a particular cause or issue (helping animals; helping younger children; caring for the elderly; feeding the homeless; food security) that you care about? Your Mitzvah Project is a wonderful opportunity to address the important causes that you see in the world around you.
 - iii. A skill or hobby: do you love a particular sport? You can volunteer with a local children's organization to share that sport with younger children. Passionate about art? Find an organization near you where you can share your art with others, or teach younger children about the art you love. Love science? Call the local elementary school and see if there are children who need a science tutor, or if you can bring an exciting science project to teach to one of the classes. How can you bring what you love to others?

2. *Do your research:*

- a. Find out what you can about the issue or cause your project addresses, in order to educate yourself and others about the importance of your project.
- b. Find the organizations in your area that you can work with that relate to your project inspiration. Search the BJE Impact directory of service organizations in greater Los Angeles at volunteer.bjela.org.



3. *Make it yours:* What does this project say about you? What do you bring to this project that is unique from anyone else?

4. *Share it!:*

- a. Share your project with others.
- b. Talk about why it is important with you, and find ways to invite others to be part of it (donate money or supplies? Volunteer with you? Advocate for the cause related to your project?).
- c. Educate other people about the cause you are making a difference on.
- d. Take pictures, write about it—and find a way to incorporate it into the day of your Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration. This was an important part of your journey toward becoming a “Jewish adult” and being an active part of your community. It should be celebrated!

Types of Mitzvah Projects:

- **DIY Mitzvah Project**
 - Do you see a need within your community, and a unique idea of how to address it? Or, a particular skill or hobby that you have that you would like to share? A DIY Mitzvah Project is one where you design a project to help others.
 - Example: Organize your family and friends to create [Homeless Care Packages](#) to keep in cars to distribute whenever you see someone in need, and explain to them why this is something you care about.
- **Volunteering with an organization**
 - What are the causes you care about? Is it helping animals? Helping the homeless? Younger children who may need tutoring or inspiration? Visiting with elderly people?
 - Search the BJE Impact directory at volunteer.bjela.org of service organizations in greater Los Angeles for organizations that relate to the causes that interest you.
 - Call them. Explain that you are interested in volunteering with them for a certain number of hours (determine in advance—does your synagogue require a certain number of hours for a Mitzvah Project? If not, how many hours can you realistically commit that will be meaningful for you?), why you want to volunteer with them, and ask what they need and how you can help.



For Parents—Guiding Your Child Through the Experience

We hope that the steps suggested above will help you and your child in identifying and implementing a Mitzvah Project.

In addition, a meaningful Mitzvah Project not only involves the “act” of the project, but also the opportunity the B’nai Mitzvah to reflect on the experience, on the impact they are making on others, and on the impact it is making on themselves.

Parents can play a key role in this reflection process, by serving as a guide throughout the experience.

What is Reflection?

“We don’t learn from experience. We learn from reflection on experience.” –John Dewey

Reflection is the process that allows us to make meaning of our experiences, to process, understand, and evaluate an experience.

There are three aspects to reflection:

- **What?** Recapture/return to the experience by recalling events and details.
- **So What?** Attend to (or connect with) feelings and the meaning of the experience for the participant.
- **Now What?** Evaluate the experience and integrate new knowledge into the “big picture,” apply lessons learned and insights gained to the future.

(From Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning, by D. Boud, R. Keogh, & D. Walker)

Reflection Questions for Parents to Ask Throughout the Experience:

- When your child is choosing their project:
 - What inspires you?
 - What are you good at, that you can help “give” to others?
 - What issues or problems do you see in our community, that you would be part of addressing?
 - What values are most important to you? As you think about being an “adult” in the community, what values do you want to act on and contribute?
 - Tell me about your Torah portion. Are there any values or “big ideas” in your Torah portion that you would like to put into action?
 - What do you hope to get out of this project?



- Is there something specific that you hope to accomplish? (i.e., do you want to do something that helps your local community? Meet new people? Try something new?)
- Are there any topics or issues that you're really passionate about, or that you'd like to learn more about?
- Prior to volunteering with an organization:
 - What do you know about the place we are going?
 - What does this organization do?
 - What problems or issues in the community is it trying to solve?
 - You can also help the child come up with questions to ask of the organization once you are there to help understand this better.
- On the way home/after the volunteer experience or working on the project:
 - What did you see and do today? Describe your experience.
 - What was the most interesting/inspiring/exciting part for you? What was the most challenging?
 - What did you think of it all? Did your understanding of the problem/issue change at all?
 - What can you/we do to further support this cause? If we are coming back again, is there anything we can or want to do differently next time? Is there anything you want to do between then and now?
- After completing the Mitzvah Project, and in preparation for sharing at the Bar/Bat Mitzvah:
 - How do you feel about your project?
 - What did you accomplish?
 - What did you learn?
 - What's one thing that you are proud of from your Mitzvah Project?
 - What's one thing you would like others to know about your Mitzvah Project?
 - Are there any ways you'd like to invite others to be part of your Mitzvah Project?

We wish you and your child a meaningful Mitzvah Project, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah, experience!

Please visit [BJE Impact: The Center for Jewish Service Learning](#) for more resources, and to contact us with any questions.